



RACISM AND IDENTITY IN NADINE GORDIMER'S JULY'S PEOPLE

Imtiyaz Ahmad Mir¹ | Dr. V. K. Saravanan²

¹ Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University.

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University.

ABSTRACT

South Africa's twentieth century witnessed a rise of the Apartheid regime movement. It was based on the separation and made apart the races of the South African society. It caused a lot of, if not a complete, destruction and suddenness on the lives of masses of people of all the races. However, these issues of racism and other sub-issues such as black identity, which might seem less important in the eyes of some writers and historians, were the mere interest of many writers and thinkers. Among them, we found Nadine Gordimer. Nadine Gordimer is a famous satirist and social reformer. She wants behind most of her novels social change and reform, and the cure for social ills, which are known as "racial segregation". Gordimer is also well known for her *July's People*, the portrayal of how would be the end of Apartheid regime in South Africa. And, since the novel in South Africa would for sure represent the political view of the author towards what happens in his/her surrounding, *July's People* may involve something historical. To justify this, it is enough to consider the fictional revolution in the novel as the prediction of the author herself of the end of the Apartheid. And then, even though *July's People* is a fictional piece of writing, it may be more realistic than fictional.

KEY WORDS: Nadine Gordimer, Racism, Identity, South Africa, Apartheid, Society.

INTRODUCTION:

Nadine Gordimer was born on November 20, 1923 for a family of white minorities; her father was of Jewish decent, and her mother was of English decent. This would influence and inspire her after that when dealing with the Apartheid system and the relation between racial groups in South Africa. Gordimer's first confrontation with racism started in her childhood. She noticed that the library she frequented was not allowed to black children (4-5).

Although she lived through an era of conflicts all over the world, Nadine Gordimer did not base her writing style and themes on them. She devoted her writings, however, to her country interests and oppression which was occurring in it. She was, as she always claimed in her writings, chosen by the subject rather than she chose it. Her speech for the blacks and coloured was in order to "coax the issues under public scrutiny, although her work is not lacking the inevitable presence of voids and silence of the oppressive culture of which it is born" (322). In other words, Gordimer by her writings wanted to make others understand their own society with its entire components.

Although she had a minor education, she devoted herself and writings to develop her country and make it better. Since her first writings, *Oral History* and *July's People*, she "devoted her life to writing collections that dealt with the racial tension that plagued her home country" (3). Gordimer, in fact, is the only writer born from a non-South African parent who "did not eventually return to the metropolitan culture which gave birth to the literature of empire. She remains in South Africa [as she believes to be one of its people], determined to invent an identity for herself as an African writer" (227). Her writings, though written in English, did not represent the English style, but it was presenting the South African style with all its aspects. Another aspect that critics focused more on is Gordimer's skin colour. They argued that she belongs to the white who are the cause and inventors of racism and Apartheid regime; so, how could she write appropriately about those she does not know well? However, although she is a white, she did not describe Africa like other whites did. Her fiction "inhabits a very different Africa" (228), not an empty world ready to be colonized by whites, nor a sad place of the modern Apartheid state.

Gordimer political view expressed in her writings, especially in *July's People*, was based on what white English-Speaking group, to which she belongs, was facing in the twentieth century. The twentieth century was characterized by the emergence of African nationalism and the success of Afrikaner nationalism. English-speaking people in South Africa found themselves in a very difficult situation which is more like discrimination than any other concept. They could not be part of the Afrikaner nationalism because of the linguistic and cultural differences nor be a part of African nationalism because of their physical appearances. In *July's People*, this awkward situation is revealed through the confusion of Maureen the protagonist of the novel between either to integrate in the black society like other members of the family, especially her three children, and reject her past life attitudes, or to flee out and restore her previous prestigious life. Gordimer did not see herself as an English descendent, but "the politics of South Africa make her an 'outsider' to the experience of the majority of her country men, and the literature of empire still haunts of her fiction" (227). To be an outsider in what you think it is your home lead her to adopt the British literary

aspects to describe her view to what is happening in her country. This attitude due to the nature of the atmosphere in South Africa where is "a book is measured of political rather than literary forces" (33). She believes that the author, and she is one of them, should be interested on the important details of human life, and do not limit him/herself in its own context i.e. his/her cultural and racial background. Nadine Gordimer as a nationalist South African argued about the South African "super-identity" (34). This super-identity has been formed because the South Africans needed it to avoid crisis and split. Gordimer's sensitivity to the mood and discourses of the current moment in South Africa is shown through her writings. One of her influential and famous novels is *July's People*.

Gordimer's *July's People* shows the relation between whites and blacks in South Africa and how blacks kept their own identity through *July's People* is one of the aims of this work.

July's People is one of Nadine Gordimer famous novels. It was written in 1981 before the collapse of the Apartheid regime as her own interpretation of how it would end. It was banned after its publication in Gordimer's own country home South Africa. The novel is set in fictional space where South Africa goes through a civil war between blacks and whites. Whites lose their power and dominance over blacks. The author situates the Smales at an unconscious period between black and white where the whites could not realize what was happening and the blacks were not sure of what is happening. The Smales is a white family living in a black village with their previous black servant as a refugee from the war in Johannesburg. The novel is a good sample of Nadine Gordimer's works which discusses and illustrates the actions of whites toward blacks and how these lost respond. It represents the author's vision and her search for "her own African perspective in a country with deepening divisions between blacks and whites..." (228). Also, the novel represents the writer's protest against the government decision to use Afrikaans instead of English as the language of study in some African schools. This act by the government was in order to reduce the blacks' access to the wider world, and to force them to accept their situation as inferiors by learning the native language of Apartheid.

July's People, like any other novel of Nadine Gordimer, is centered on the relation between the races illustrated by the relation between Maureen, the protagonist, and other characters especially her servant July. Also, the novel expresses a shift of the balance of power. "White people gradually deprived of power and at the mercy of increasingly empowered black men" (25). This shift could explain the situation that whites were taking before upon the blacks, and it is clear that the black is considered always as a servant to the whites rather than anything even he is their saviour. On their very first morning in the native village of their servant July, while living in the July's mother-in-law's hut, the odd situation for the Smales family starts. In *July's People*, Gordimer speaks of a segregated society, which is presented and embodied in her fictional characters. In this work, when referring to the act of racism, it is not strictly limited to the physical separation, but it is more mental racism. This is because physical and mental racism generally go together; the racist acts of a person are likely done without thinking. In other words, they are done carelessly without taking into consideration the results of the person's behavior. When it comes to the physical separation, we notice two parts that whites and blacks are described as separated

in the novel. The first one is their separation before the war which we can perceive through the description of their past house in Johannesburg. The second case is when the Smales are in July's village where they are living in July's mother-in-law's hut.

This physical segregation is accompanied by a mental racism and segregation. The mental racism is embodied by the bad behaviour of Maureen toward July. Maureen is July's boss for fifteen years, and she still behaves like that. Although she acknowledges in her speech his act of saving them like what she expresses in the novel by "frog prince, saviour, July" (11), she does believe that it was his duty as a servant to do so. Gordimer saw Maureen as "the last colonial woman" (82) because she is directed and took care by men who are related to her from father to husband, even July, the black servant, took care of her and tried to keep her out of problems and at ease. These acts are "a typically colonial attitude—that the white woman has a man who looks after her" (581). Maureen identifies Bam's shameful behavior and inability to save them from the situation, as a betrayal. Just as July's refusal to hunt down the gun an ultimate protector of white power is a betrayal of their long-time relationship that she arrogantly assumed was based on their mutual regard. Female white mistresses, especially educated, liberal ones that Maureen represents, were as guilty as the masters of unconscious patriotism during the apartheid era. For Maureen prestigious and racial value, the change she went through is so fast. The changing of the sequence of her past life leads her to "another time, place, consciousness" (29). She feels very soon after their arrival in the village that she has been transformed utterly: "She was already not what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination" (29). This would explain the transformation of their life and power from whites, who thought themselves as superior, to blacks, the former servants.

Also, her dignity as a former boss is totally destroyed when she realizes that she is more dependent on July rather than him on her. She thought about previous time when she is used to give charity to him and his wife. However, she realizes after getting close to them that they do not need what she thought they do. Maureen feels obliged to change her behaviour toward him because she discovers another version of their past, July's version. Even though she is convinced to change her thoughts and attitudes, Maureen always has self-justification and recrimination to justify her acts. However, Maureen tries to understand why July helped them to flee from the apocalypse that occurred in the city. What she could understand that he is "not a simple man" (60). This simplicity, that she thought he is, is due to her view to him as inferior without any complexity in his life like she does as a civilized and a member of the upper-class (white). Also, she could not even understand him because of his servant's awkward not perfect English because of the influence of his native language and accent. Besides all these acts toward July, Maureen, and even her husband Bam, behave rudely with him, especially when he refuses to do something. For example, when July refuses to look after the lost gun, Maureen accuses July of stealing small items from her in Johannesburg. This accusation is due to herself view to herself as the master who has everything that her servant would want to steal. In addition to Maureen, her husband Bam treats July as inferior. This action is mainly because his loss of his possessions and position. He loses his power and status once his "cheque-book" and prestigious career as architect are worthless in the village economy. Bam, as he is seen after the precious gun is discovered stolen, is emasculated by losing his possessions: "He lay down on his back, on that bed... and at once suddenly rolled over onto his face, as the father had never done before his sons... She looked down on this man who had nothing, now. There was before these children something much worse than the sight of the women's broad backsides, squatting" (25).

Left with only shame, as he is undefined as a man without his money, career, vehicle, and gun, he abruptly gives up his responsibilities and previous morals. All in all the concept of racism was discussed through *July's People* by the acts and attitudes of the Smales couple, Maureen and Bam, toward their black servant July and his people in general. Whether by living apart of them, acting differently and even underestimate their culture and way of living.

The concept of identity in *July's People* is divided into two parts: the black identity and the white identity. The novel is based on the struggle between the two. The two main characters, July and Maureen, are the representatives of each identity. Maureen tried to act as she used to with the white supremacy and superiority, but July reacted differently as he used to do for fifteen years of his service. He became more complex and aggressive toward her superiority. However, the first sign of black identity in the novel is its title "*July's People*". It tells us that those blacks are people we should explore and discover. The black identity is revealed through the novel more and more.

The first sight of black identity in South Africa in the novel is the relationship between Maureen and July: the relationship between master and servant. Blacks were seen as servant, just simple servant. Or what Gordimer expressed as "the decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them in two sets of uniforms... allowed to have his friends visit him and his town woman sleep with him in his room" (11). This would make the blacks dependent on whites, but reality was the opposite because through the novel the Smales couples discover how much they were dependent on their servant. Also, the black's tribal system astonished Maureen with her accustomed

view of the social system which was based on the family rather than the tribe. This system is known all over the African continent, and each tribe has specific conditions and quality. When Maureen woke up in her first day in July's village, she noticed that the tribal hut was dark traced by some brightness (3). In addition, the tribe prizes of their chief and obeys him totally. Also they managed themselves with nature in order to survive rather than be dependent on the white's stuffs and way of life. Even in the building of their houses they rearrange their "meager resources around the bases of nature, letting the walls of mud sink back to mud and then using that mud for new walls..." (31). This kind of architect that is used by Africans destroys the principles of white's architecture which Bam represent as he is a white architect. So, with the preserving of the black identity, the white identity is humiliated and became nonsense. Besides July's people stick to their culture and identity, the Smales stick to their white culture became less when they interacted with the blacks, except for Maureen who felt threatened by black culture. Her daughter Gina became more familiar with the black culture and played with black girls without any complex. She even eats "mealie-meal with her fingers" from a shared pot with other small girls (47). Even the father became involved in the village life. Bam discusses with other men, and tries to make him understood.

Furthermore, July became more aggressive toward Maureen. He gradually withstands her, displaying through language that does not fear for the first time to lay bare suppressed opinions:

—Me? I must know who is stealing your things? Same like always. You make too much trouble for me. Here in my home too. Daniel, the chief, my-mother- my-wife with the house. Trouble, trouble from you. I don't want it anymore. You see? — His hands flung out away from himself. — You've got to get it back. — No no. No no. — hysterically smiling repeating... She was stamped by a wild rush of need to destroy everything between them. (26)

This attitude was his reaction as he felt free from her service. Maureen was not able to pay him, and he was serving her whenever she pays him. When she could not, he thought he was free from her, and he knew that he would not be in bad situation because he was not a slave. He was just a servant who would find another job if there is no job for the Smales.

July's People is a novel written by Nadine Gordimer. The author was influenced by her environment, and her writing was just a reaction toward what she was living. The novel present the life of South Africa during a fictional space where the black rebelled against the Apartheid regime. A white family, Smales, fled from the war in Johannesburg to their black servant village. Through the novel we notice a lot of signs of racism. Racism is shown through the acts of Maureen and her husband toward their servant July and his people. In addition, we notice the reaction of July and his people to ward those actions which was through their behaving as they are and do not imitate the white.

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